

STATINTL

WILMINGTON, DEL.
JOURNAL

E - 89,875 APR 17 1977

A Case of Helmsmanship

A PARADOX in relative popularity is the way this country has made a hero of James Bond and a villain of the CIA. The fictional Bond can delight readers with his dirty tricks, but the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency generates a widespread distrust in this country that at times approaches the morbid.

The CIA has asked for some of it. There is still the Bay of Pigs to live down, the interviewing of students back from abroad drew campus protests, and there are those who say the agency has a disproportionate share of the responsibility for Vietnam.

With that background the American Society of Newspaper Editors counted it a coup to have Richard Helms, the CIA director, make his first public speech anywhere as director before the society's meeting in Washington.

It was one of those appearances which couldn't hurt, and possibly helped. The attention given to it brought into focus the realization that any nation today would be naive not to have a system to collect and assess foreign intelligence. The day of an American statesman scorning an espionage system as something not for gentlemen is long gone.

Yet, Mr. Helms told the editors,

"There is a persistent and growing body of criticism which questions the need and propriety for a democratic society to have a Central Intelligence Agency." He voiced his respect for this, except for those critics who, "taking advantage of the traditional silence of those engaged in intelligence, say things that are either vicious or just plain silly."

The silence of the service only helps to blow its mistakes out of proportion. As he said, there is no point in handing the opposition how much is known on a platter. He made no mention of accusations that the CIA takes an active role in foreign politics, but did say, "We not only have no stake in policy debates, but we cannot and must not take sides."

In all, the speech helped illustrate the measure of respect in which Mr. Helms is held in Washington. He told the editors, "We believe, and I say this solemnly, that our work is necessary to permit this country to grow on in a fearsome world..."

Both for those who share that belief and those who in all conscience believe that anything like the CIA does not fit into a democracy, Mr. Helms left the impression of a high level of competence.